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ABSTRACT

In Nashville, Tennessee, there are children representing 24 different non-English language groups. Teachers involved with planning instruction for and teaching such language minority children should consider not only the language differences, but also the cultural differences since many foreign students are from cultures very different from the American mainstream. While teachers need to learn about the students' culture, children should be developing oral English first. An adaptation of the language experience approach may be helpful. A directed reading activity procedure is useful with a basal approach since many concepts and grammatical patterns in basals are rather difficult and will need explaining. A decoding approach to reading instruction for nonnative speaking children is not recommended initially. A survival reading curriculum is important since the child will need to read many out-of-school materials. When evaluating oral reading the teacher must be careful not to confuse native language interferences with decoding errors. Reading to children and having them listen to stories on tape are useful in helping these children learn English intonation patterns. Suggestions from a group of English as a second language teachers in Nashville include many of the above, with cautions that slower pacing and overteaching are required. (MKM)

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Reading Instruction for the Language Minority Child

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READING INSTRUCTION FOR THE LANGUAGE MINORITY CHILD

It is probable that, unless teachers are located within those states or cities that typically attract very large numbers of non-English speaking persons, they have not even considered the likelihood of a language minority child within their own classrooms. Language minority children are those whose mother tongue is not English or who live in homes in which languages other than English are spoken (Waggoner, 1978). In a recent survey it was noted that Tennessee was among those states having the lowest number and smallest percentage of language minority persons. (Waggoner, 1978) Yet, within Metropolitan Nashville, which is an inland city of about 500,000, children from 24 different non-English language groups are represented within the public school system. The majority language groups, each of which includes twenty or more students, are Vietnamese, Korean, Spanish, French, Iranian, Chinese, Laotian, Japanese, German, and Indonesian. The minority language groups are Arabic, Bengali, Finnish, Hebrew, Hindi, Kurdish, Malaya, Nigerian, Portuguese, Shona, Tagalog, Teluga, Thai, Yoruba. (Reynolds, 1977) It is significant that these children, for the most part, also represent cultures very different from the American mainstream.

It is almost impossible to discuss an appropriate reading program for a language minority child and consider only the impact of language differences (the sound spelling system, grammatical structures...). Assuming that comprehension is the goal of reading instruction, the child's cultural differences (unique values, patterns of relationships, school expectations ...) must like-wise be considered. Basal readers for example, assume

children have had certain background experiences (have been to a zoo, a birthday party...), possess typical definitions (milk is a nutritious drink essential to children's health and development...) and ascribe to particular values (competition is natural to our way of life...) When children's experiences, concepts and/or values are greatly divergent, comprehension of such texts, unless there is intervening instruction, will probably be inadequate.

Let us assume, then, that a language minority child in any reading classroom is a very real possibility. The focus of the following discussion is to present suggestions for developing a reading program within the regular classroom for a language minority child. The teacher is alerted to some of the possible cultural and language differences in language minority children. Suggestions are offered for planning a reading program so as to accommodate to these differences. The discussion is general; a teacher will need to make adjustments to accommodate to a child's particular native language and particular cultural background.

Metropolitan Nashville English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers have noted a variety of differences in their language minority children. A few of these are shared to alert the teacher. While reading the following, consider for yourself how each may be a source of difficulty for a child trying to master English decoding principles, comprehend typical English basal readers or content texts and/or relate to the teacher within the teaching-learning interaction.

1. Reading in the native language may require right to left processing or moving from the top to the bottom of vertical lines of print.

2. The native language may not be alphabetic; English is (each graphic symbol signals an English sound unit).
3. Children may have been taught to write so that words run through the line, not on it.
4. Milk and chocolate are unknown foods to some children. When first introduced, these foods may make them sick.
5. In some cultures the teacher is revered; hence children make no eye contact with the teacher. Or the teacher is respectfully called "teacher" and not "Ms.____" or "Mr.____."
6. Some children find it improper for a teacher to touch their heads or bodies. This is too familiar.
7. Children may come from cultures where the male is highly valued and the female is not. Encountering a woman in a dominant role may be a difficult adjustment for the child.
8. Children may come from cultures where social or religious codes mandate strict dress requirements for women. Seeing their teacher or principal in slacks or a sundress may be confusing and unsettling.
9. Children, depending on their social strata in the native country, may never have been to school, never used pencils, crayons or scissors, never had a family radio, T.V. or a car, or never slept in a bed.
10. If language minority children have been political refugees, they may have been raised in a refugee camp and now reflect the fears and insecurities associated with such an experience.

When teachers recognize how such differences impact on children's mastery of the reading process in English, they can be certain to orient a child to unique aspects of the English language and American culture, as well as provide specific instruction in English sounds, concepts or grammar as required.

Planning a Reading Program for the Language Minority Child

Assuming that reading is essentially language processing, most authorities agree that a prerequisite to learning to read in English is acquiring a base of oral English competence. (Thonis 1977, 1979; Ching 1976) This should include familiarity with both lexical and structural vocabulary and basic English structures (sentence patterns and the noun and verb phrase structures within these patterns).

In the most optimum situation the language minority child first learning to read will be seeing an ESL teacher, who will be developing oral English, and also receiving initial reading instruction in the familiar native language. Instruction in reading English is delayed.

Often, for a variety of reasons, the ESL and/or native language support is not directly available. The classroom teacher is then responsible for teaching the language minority child to read English. This instruction can be given as soon as the child can process the language structures included within the reading materials designated for the child's use. Additionally the child needs the critical concepts and English words for the concepts in those materials. Critical concepts are those required to get the most central idea of a reading selection, e.g. "dog" may be a critical concept in a selection about a boy's pet and not critical in a selection

about a visit to a pet store in which "dog" is only mentioned. The ESL teacher in the school or system should aid the teacher in designing appropriate pre-reading language activities for the language minority child and alerting the teacher to ways in which on-going classroom activities can be adapted and peer interaction utilized to assure the child has the English language base required to begin to learn to read.

Whether a child is first learning to read or is transferring knowledge of reading in the native language to reading English, it is possible to make some generalizations about how best to help the child develop English reading competence.

One of the most critical tasks for the teacher is to continue development of the language and experiential base required to comprehend the reading materials. This will necessitate many global receptive and expressive language activities but also lessons specifically directed at developing important concepts in the reading materials. Such lessons may be required by other children within the classroom. The language minority child will probably need individualized instruction within pre-post reading activities and/or peer teaching to provide sufficient opportunities to experience each new concept and to receive and produce the language associated with it.

Equally important in developing a reading program for the language minority child is to assure that the child perceives himself/herself as a good reader. Success for the child then is critical. Implementing suggestions included in the following discussion will promote the child's reading competence. Additionally, the teacher needs to make an honest effort to learn about the child's culture, help other students respect the child's

cultural uniqueness and include reading materials or study projects related to the minority culture. In these ways the child will be assured of place and worth in the classroom. The teacher will also profit from such activities. Learning about the child's culture should be interesting; additionally, such knowledge will help the teacher work most effectively with the child avoiding misunderstandings and potentially hurtful non-communications.

A classroom teacher implementing a reading program for a language minority child will find the ESL teacher an invaluable help. An ESL teacher can give general information to the classroom teacher regarding the child's experiential base and English language competence and thus facilitate teacher-child understanding and communication. When familiar with the conceptual and language demands of the reading materials within the classroom, the ESL teacher can likewise help to pinpoint specific problems the child may encounter when using those materials, e.g., formulations of inference questions in the manual are too complex for the child to comprehend; in the child's native country, animals are not allowed in the house so certain basal stories may be difficult to comprehend; because of the child's particular native language, a specific English blend may be difficult to produce. Further, when the pre-post reading activities, required for the child's successful comprehension, focus on developing concepts and expanding expressive language, the ESL teacher may be able to assist the classroom teacher in providing these activities.

Several reading approaches seem reasonable for use with language minority children.

Language minority children may profit from an adaption of the language experience approach. First the teacher plans a series of activities in which children experience a concept in a variety of ways. During these experiences the teacher provides appropriate English for the language minority child, labeling the concept and using it within simple oral contexts. The teacher encourages the child to model that language within discussion of the concept experience. The composition following these experiences and discussion will include the written counterpart for the appropriate English the child has been modeling. This is used as reading material. Such a procedure promotes development of oral English and aquaintance with the American culture, and also insures that the reading will be a meaningful activity. The language experience approach can of course be used to help other children in the classroom learn more about the language minority child. The "experience" could be an artifact or custom or some of the native language that the language minority child shares with the class.

A basal approach, using a directed reading activity procedure (the teacher providing preparation for the reading, guiding the reading and providing follow-up activities), can be useful. Some cautions are in order. Basals do not include control of sentence pattern as they do vocabulary, thus the beginning reader may find English structures he/she cannot successfully process. If so, the adaptation of the language experience approach discussed earlier, with its potential for regulating the amount and type of language included, may be a more viable approach until the child has a larger oral English repertoire.

Basals assume many experiences and concepts are common to the children

using them; thus basal manuals do not target these for teaching. (In an informal survey of the first six levels of a popular basal series, one ESL teacher counted reference to over 100 different animals, over half of them essential to comprehension of the story.) The language minority child may not have many of these concepts within his/her experience; however, in order to please the teacher the child may say something is known when it is not. Also, when a child has limited English, the teacher may have difficulty discerning whether a concept must be developed or whether the child must simply be taught an English counterpart for a known concept. The teacher would probably be wise to err on the side of over-teaching concepts, or the language minority child may not be able to comprehend the English text.

The pacing of basals is often inappropriate for language minority children. They will probably require additional pre-reading activities to establish the experiential and language base as background for comprehending the story. (Of course, the teacher may find the child's prior water buffalo experience can be used to set the stage for comprehending the text.) Likewise, the child will probably require additional post-reading language activities to assure comprehension of critical text ideas and at the same time extend oral language competence.

A decoding approach to reading instruction, either phonic or linguistic, is not recommended. The child's native language may cause interference when trying to visually and auditorily discriminate sounds and letters and thus make phonics very difficult. When applying decoding generalizations a reader frequently only approximates the target word. If the tar-

get word is in the reader's oral language, the approximation may trigger the correct word for the reader. Unless the language minority child has a large oral English vocabulary, knowledge of decoding generalizations alone will not enable him/her to be a successful decoder.

It may, of course, be important for the language minority child to master the sound spelling system and to independently decode written English. The child should be taught to rely on all cues, graphic-phonic, syntactic and semantic. Instruction in the use of these cue systems should proceed analytically, with comprehension as rationale for their mastery and use. Over-emphasis on the sound symbol system has been responsible for many language minority children decoding competently without even minimal comprehension.

Several other considerations are important when planning a reading program for a language minority child:

The language minority child needs to and wants to read many out-of-school things (street signs, product labels, newspapers...), thus including survival reading in the curriculum is important. The teacher must, however, recognize that the native language will probably continue to be the dominant language used in the home. When planning survival reading activities, the teacher will initially select those the child may need in order to cope with the world outside the home (the school, stores, the neighborhood...).

When evaluating the language minority child's reading, it is especially important that placement decisions are not based on oral reading alone, since these children may display a great discrepancy between decod-

ing abilities and comprehension. When evaluating oral reading the teacher must be careful not to confuse native language interference with decoding errors. If the child's reading patterns the oral English, e.g., substituting the r sound for the l sound in words, this may suggest remediation of the oral English but is not a reading problem.

Language minority children usually profit from activities designed to give them an aural sense of the rhythm and flow of English. Reading to children, having them participate in choral reading or speaking and listening to stories on tape are all useful in helping these children learn English intonation patterns.

Recently Metropolitan Nashville ESL teachers were asked to consider what they might say to classroom teachers who were teaching reading to their language minority children. The ESL teachers' responses are included. They reinforce and expand the previous discussion.

1. The teacher should learn about the language minority children and help them share their culture with others.
2. The children's experiential base is not American; they will express themselves differently, react differently and have different expectations of the teacher and school.
3. Slower pacing and overteaching are required. The teacher and/or children can become frustrated; patience from the teacher is essential.
4. The children are usually motivated so it is important for the teacher to show them there is some reading they can do.

5. Peer instruction can be useful.
6. Encourage the children to read and expect them to get some meaning; however, don't expect them to comprehend everything. At first, the children may comprehend only the main idea of a selection. Don't try to teach every word or idea in a selection.
7. Initial reading selections should include simple information or direct narrative and not have a strong cultural overload or include strong feelings. Such selections will be more difficult to comprehend and discuss. Later, reading can become a means for language minority children to learn about the new culture.
8. Vocabulary building is critical. Idiomatic expressions and multiple meanings of words are particularly difficult.
9. Good decoding does not necessarily indicate understanding.
10. The ability to define a word in isolation will not insure textual comprehension.
11. When teachers ask if they understand something, language minority children may be too shy or afraid to admit they don't. The children usually want to succeed, want to please the teacher, and may "fake" understanding.
12. Language minority children are capable of thinking (inferencing and evaluating) but may not yet have the English to express their thinking.

In summary, it has been suggested that a teacher's awareness of the culture of the language minority child and acceptance of the child's uniqueness are critical to success in teaching reading to that child. Given both

a supportive learning environment and the specific program adaptations just outlined, it seems reasonable that a classroom teacher can be successful teaching a language minority child to read English.

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